

Robin Higham. *Two Roads to War: The French and British Air Arms from Versailles to Dunkirk.* Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2012. Illustrations. xxii + 410 pp. \$44.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-61251-058-3.



Reviewed by James F. Slaughter III

Published on H-War (January, 2014)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Robin Higham's latest work continues his successes in highlighting airpower in twentieth-century military history. The author's main argument is that the French *Armée de l'Air* (ALA) failed in World War II not simply because it had less effective planes than others fighting the war, but because conditions in French government, society, industry, and the military were so poor it simply could not "get off the ground." It dovetails neatly into his previous work *Why Air Forces Fail: The Anatomy of Defeat* (2006), coedited with Stephen J. Harris. The real value of *Two Roads to War* is its exploration of the organization and development of the ALA, a neglected topic in the English language. Higham's book highlights the fundamentally different development of the British Royal Air Force (RAF) and ALA during the same period, 1933 to 1940, and facing the same threat, Adolf Hitler's Germany. Following the Geneva conference's failure, Japanese expansion in Asia and later smaller conflicts, such as the Spanish Civil War and Italian expansion in Africa, the world slowly began to prepare for a major conflict. Crises in Eu-

rope gained speed as the Rhineland, Austria, the Sudetenland (by agreement in Munich), and then the remainder of Czechoslovakia were occupied by Hitler. The Luftwaffe, banned by Versailles, was flaunted by the Nazis. Giulio Douhet's *Command of the Air* (1921), combined with vivid memories of strategic bombing in World War I, left the French and British scrambling for an answer to a perceived threat in Germany, which was little understood but greatly feared. Higham illustrates how two very different solutions were arrived at by two very different nations with now well-known results.

In part 1, "Legacies of WWI," Higham rapidly summarizes French and British positions before, during, and immediately following WWI. Here, Higham sets the stage. French and British weaknesses are explored regarding not simply airpower, but also the all-important societies, governments, and economies that led to the production and organization of airpower. Higham relates the concepts of management and production as being very different in France and Britain. He also illus-

trates the two different moods resulting from WWI and Versailles. While Britain moved back into an imperial mode, France became more insular and defensive.

In part 2, "The Interwar Years, 1918-1939," Higham examines the processes in play in France and Britain between the wars and the aircraft industries in each country. Higham does an excellent job helping the reader understand how France went from being a leader in aircraft production to woefully behind friends and enemies on the eve of World War II. In this section, he illustrates a small but alive aviation industry in Britain. This was kept up to reasonably modern standards by an independent RAF, a modern concept of industrial production and management, and a productive and stable government and military structure. Higham then colors a France with no air ministry until 1928, no independent air force until 1933, stagnant military intellectualism, a questionably stable government and society, and a workshop or atelier aircraft industry that simply could not produce enough modern equipment fast enough for a modern war. Further, Higham depicts a gravely inefficient production and procurement process in France where workshops were able to produce airframes, but not engines or other vital equipment, such as suitably modern reliable armament.

In part 3, "The Road to War, 1933-1940," Higham targets the underlying causes of French failure and British success in planning and producing an air force prior to WWII. Having created a solid foundation, he justifiably criticizes the French government, people, and military for what can best be described as working almost deliberately against their own self-interest in the face of a looming threat, which produced predictable results. Higham describes a France always dancing around the fringes of a civil war between an ultraconservative right, which represented most private industry, the army, and the navy, and a socialist left, which flirted with Communism, even-

tually giving way to it until it was outlawed. He colors a France on the verge of another 1789, a France radically divided. Higham describes governments rapidly switching back and forth, doing and undoing legislation in a cycle of internal revenge. French industry was trying to modernize with classes of workers and management who never spoke with one another, but constantly attacked one another. This radically contrasted with a Britain in which all parties certainly did not agree, but at least had a sense of unity strong enough to try to prepare itself and its military for war in a productive and efficient manner. Higham also brings to a head the fight the ALA undertook to preserve its independence, which it lost in everything in name becoming a slave to an army that did not understand what to do with it on the eve of WWII. He also shows an aircraft industry in Britain that continued to innovate and evolve to meet the coming threat and one in France that simply could not get off the ground until immediately before the war. Even after the controversial Pierre Cot nationalized the aircraft industry, wasteful and ineffective procurement, production, and distribution problems remained. One could easily come to the conclusion from Higham's excellent data that there were probably as many new unfinished planes on the ground in France in July 1940 as were destroyed in actual combat against Germany.

In part 4, "War, 1938-40," Higham provides the last details before the six-week campaign that ultimately defeated France. The author paints a picture of two allies trying to make final preparations for the war they knew was coming with Germany. Higham concludes that the months between September 1938 and May 1940 were squandered. While France did continue to mobilize it never got its newest models into production nor did it take the lessons learned in the opening stages of the war seriously. For its part, Higham illustrates how Britain did try to be the good sup-

porting ally, but how it always played its cards close to its chest when dealing with France.

The main strength of Higham's work is his ability to place the ALA's failure in WWII where it belongs: not with simply too few or inferior aircraft, but with a country pitted against itself. Higham's contrast with Britain and the RAF is productive and effective. While the trials and tribulations in Britain before WWII are well known, it is sometimes difficult to understand how little friction was truly generated in the process and how productive it really was without the French counterexample. The ALA failed because the French aero-industry was archaic. The procurement and production systems were inefficient. French society and government were divided. The French military, partly because of internal culture and partly because it had to work in French society and government, never did anything productive with the ALA. In fact, it threw away what could have been the most decisive tool at its disposal in a war of rapid movement. Higham fuses this argument into a meaningful and coherent whole.

Historiographically, this book is superior, no doubt due to Higham's extensive work in the field and his understanding of the issues. From the secondary source point of view, it is hard to imagine a better place to start especially if one wants to begin to learn about the ALA. It is perhaps a bit weak in French primary source material, barring official manuals, but this work did well without it. Higham perhaps did not examine Pierre Cot in as much detail as might have been appropriate, but it did nothing to reduce the effectiveness of his argument. Japan is also hardly mentioned in this work, but in fairness, very little has been written regarding British preparations for the air war against Japan, much less the French. While the air war in the Pacific during WWII was largely a United States versus Japan affair, a few words about how each country thought about and prepared for the Japanese air threat could have added some valuable context. Some may state the

rehashing of prewar RAF planning is old hat. In this case it certainly is not. Without the contrast provided, the lessons would not be as meaningful. One can look at a diseased organ and not realize how bad a state it is truly in unless one has a healthy organ with which to compare it.

Higham does bounce around a little chronologically, which may occasionally give one the feeling they are reading a slightly redundant passage. However, as the author defends in his introduction, this method is useful in providing an evolving story line. In short, this work is excellent in bringing a critically neglected topic to light. While there is a multitude of works available in English about the RAF prior to WWII, there are pitifully few about the ALA. Higham provides an excellent springboard for exploring the ALA further, and begins to fill the void in English-language historiography regarding the ALA from 1918 to 1940.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: James F. Slaughter III. Review of Higham, Robin. *Two Roads to War: The French and British Air Arms from Versailles to Dunkirk*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. January, 2014.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=38339>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.